Tubman, Harriet

(b. c. 1820, Dorchester county, Md., U.S.--d. March 10, 1913, Auburn, N.Y.), black American bondwoman who escaped from slavery in the South to become a leading abolitionist (see abolitionism) before the American Civil War. She came to be known as the "Moses of her people" as she led hundreds of bondsmen to freedom in the North along the route of the Underground Railroad—an elaborate secret network of safe houses organized for that purpose.

In 1849 Tubman escaped from a plantation on the eastern shore of Maryland and made her way north by the Underground Railroad. In 1850 she returned to Maryland to guide members of her family north to freedom. She soon became one of the "railroad's" most active "conductors," making frequent trips into the South to bring out escaping slaves. Despite huge rewards offered for her capture, she helped more than 300 slaves to escape. She maintained military discipline among her followers, often forcing the weary or the fainthearted ahead by threatening them with a loaded revolver.

A devout Christian who relied on God for her strength and guidance, Tubman became a friend of many of the best-known abolitionists and their sympathizers. John Brown refers to her in his letters as "one of the best and bravest persons on this continent--General Tubman as we call her."

During the Civil War Tubman served as a nurse, laundress, and spy with the Federal forces along the coast of South Carolina. After the war she made her home in Auburn, N.Y., and, despite numerous honours, spent her last years in poverty. Not until 30 years after the war was she granted a government pension in recognition of her work for the Federal Army.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.